Matriarchs of the Little Balkans: Julia Youvan, Mary Skubitz, and the 1921 Amazon Army of the Kansas Coalfields

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In December 1921, the coalfields of Southeast Kansas were in a state of suspended animation. With the male leadership of the United Mine Workers of America District 14 incarcerated under the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations Act, the strikes against the coal operators were faltering. In this critical vacuum of leadership, the women of the Little Balkans stepped into the vanguard of the labor struggle. Leading this massive, multi-ethnic mobilization were Julia Youvan and her daughter Mary Skubitz. Representing a powerful mother-daughter command structure, they transformed a disparate group of immigrant women into the disciplined force known nationally as the Amazon Army. Julia served as the respected matriarch rallying the older generations, while Mary, fluent in five languages, translated tactical orders across ethnic lines to ensure the thousands of marching women moved as a cohesive unit. Together, they orchestrated the red pepper marches, leveraging their gender and social mores to halt non-union strikebreakers without triggering a lethal military response. Targeted by the state as the primary architects of the uprising, their subsequent arrest and punitive bail bonds highlighted their profound threat to industrial capitalism. Through Mary's meticulous ledger-paper journal, the intimate details of their defiance survive. This paper explores their pivotal roles, demonstrating how the Youvan women redefined the boundaries of the domestic sphere to wage an unprecedented campaign of civil disobedience.

Keywords: Amazon Army, 1921 Kansas Coal Strike, Mary Skubitz, Julia Youvan, United Mine Workers of America, UMWA District 14, Labor History, Little Balkans, Women in Labor, Civil Disobedience, Red Pepper Marches.

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1. Historical Context: The Little Balkans and the Post-War Coal Crisis

1.1 The Post-War Economic Landscape and the Collapse of Coal Prices To fully understand the explosive nature of the labor disputes in 1921, it is essential to examine the precarious state of the American economy following the conclusion of World War I. During the global conflict, the demand for coal had reached unprecedented heights as the nation's industrial machine accelerated to support the Allied war effort. To ensure a steady supply of fuel for trains, factories, and steamships, the federal government intervened to regulate prices and mediate labor disputes through the creation of the United States Fuel Administration. This wartime oversight provided a period of relative stability and high wages for the miners, as the government prioritized uninterrupted production over corporate autonomy.

However, with the signing of the Armistice in 1918, this protective regulatory framework was dismantled almost overnight. The sudden transition back to a peacetime economy led to a massive domestic surplus of coal and a sharp, devastating drop in market prices. In a desperate scramble to maintain profit margins, coal operators immediately moved to slash their operating costs. The burden of this severe economic contraction fell squarely on the shoulders of the working miners, who faced drastic wage cuts, reduced working hours, and the systematic dismantling of the safety and employment protections they had temporarily enjoyed during the war years. In the early 1920s, coal was the undisputed lifeblood of the American industrial empire, powering the locomotives that connected the coasts and the furnaces that forged steel for rising urban skylines. Because the entire infrastructure of the United States was tethered to coal, the men who extracted it held a unique and dangerous form of leverage. A total stoppage in the coalfields did not merely affect a single company; it had the potential to paralyze the entire national economy within a matter of weeks. Consequently, coal operators viewed any attempt at unionization not just as an economic threat, but as a fundamental challenge to the very order of American capitalism.

1.2 The Geography and Demographics of the Southeast Kansas Coalfields While much of the national attention regarding labor unrest focused on the mountainous terrain of Appalachia, the Kansas front of the 1921 Mine Wars was centered in the flat but equally volatile coalfields of Crawford and Cherokee counties. This region was colloquially known as the Little Balkans due to its highly concentrated and hyper-diverse population of immigrants. Coal companies had aggressively recruited workers from across Europe, drawing Italians, Balkans, and Eastern Europeans to labor in the region's treacherous deep shaft and strip mines.

Unlike the deeply isolated company towns of West Virginia, the Kansas mining communities were organized as a network of interconnected camps and small towns. This geographic proximity allowed the miners and their families to share a fierce culture of radicalism and mutual aid, blending traditional European concepts of communal solidarity with American labor

activism. However, by 1921, these miners found themselves caught in a devastating economic vice. The post-war industrial slump hit the Kansas coalfields particularly hard. The lower-quality bituminous coal produced in the Little Balkans struggled to compete with more efficient fuel sources in a tightening national market. Consequently, miners faced frequent, unpredictable seasonal layoffs and a total lack of corporate investment in safety infrastructure, creating a powder keg of resentment across the immigrant communities.

1.3 The Company Town System and Industrial Feudalism Life for a coal miner and his family in the early 1920s was largely defined by a totalizing system of corporate paternalism known as the company town. In remote mining regions, coal companies built entire villages from the ground up to house their workforce. While the operators often framed this as a necessity of geography, it functioned in reality as a sophisticated mechanism of social and economic control. In these towns, the coal company owned the house the miner lived in, the store where he bought his food, the water he drank, and even the church where his family worshipped.

Miners were frequently paid in scrip, a private form of corporate currency that was only redeemable at the company-owned store. Prices for basic necessities at these stores were frequently marked up significantly higher than in independent markets. This exploitative practice created a perpetual cycle of debt that made it nearly impossible for a mining family to save money or relocate from the area. Furthermore, the company employed private detectives and armed mine guards who acted as a private corporate police force. These guards actively monitored all social interactions, intercepted private mail, and immediately evicted any family suspected of union sympathies from their company-owned housing. To be a miner in a non-union district was to live in a state of industrial feudalism where civil liberties effectively ended at the property line of the coal company. This architecture of control, combined with the post-war collapse of wages, set the stage for the explosive labor conflicts that would soon consume the Little Balkans.

2. The Legal Stranglehold: Governor Allen and the Industrial Court

2.1 The 1919 National Coal Strike and State Seizure of the Mines The specific legal stranglehold that would eventually force the women of the Little Balkans into the streets began with the national coal strike of 1919. As that strike took hold in the dead of winter, Kansas Governor Henry J. Allen took the unprecedented and highly controversial step of seizing the regional coal mines on behalf of the state. To bypass the striking union miners, Allen called for volunteers—primarily university students and returning military veterans—to operate the mines under the armed protection of the Kansas National Guard.

While these inexperienced "volunteer miners" produced very little usable coal, the exercise was a resounding political success for the governor. Allen expertly used the crisis to launch a public relations campaign that framed the striking miners as selfish enemies of the public welfare. He argued passionately that the right of the general public to have fuel to heat their homes during winter fundamentally superseded the right of any worker to strike. This ideological stance resonated with an anxious public and became the foundation for a radical new legal framework, effectively turning the state of Kansas into a national laboratory for aggressive anti-union legislation.

2.2 The Creation of the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations Bolstered by his political victory during the 1919 strike, Governor Allen moved to permanently restructure labor relations in the state. In early 1920, the Kansas legislature passed the Court of Industrial Relations Act, a sweeping and unprecedented law that was watched with intense interest by corporate leaders and politicians across the nation.

The act mandated the creation of a three-judge panel endowed with the absolute power to intervene in and settle disputes within "essential industries". The law broadly defined these essential sectors to include the production of food, the manufacturing of clothing, and, most crucially for the immigrant communities of Southeast Kansas, the mining of fuel. Under this new legal paradigm, the traditional practice of collective bargaining was completely dismantled and replaced with a system of compulsory arbitration. Instead of workers and employers negotiating contracts at a bargaining table, the state-appointed judges were given the final, binding say on all matters concerning wages and working conditions.

2.3 The Criminalization of Collective Bargaining and the Right to Strike The most devastating impact of the Industrial Court Act was the outright criminalization of labor's most powerful tool. Under the law, strikes within the designated essential industries were effectively made illegal. Any union leader who called a strike, or any individual worker who participated in a walkoff, could be immediately arrested, fined, and imprisoned.

For the coal miners of Crawford and Cherokee counties, this act was not merely an economic setback; it was a totalizing assault on their fundamental civil liberties. It stripped them of their only effective leverage—the right to collectively withhold their labor—and placed their livelihoods entirely in the hands of a political body that they viewed as intrinsically biased toward the wealthy coal operators.

By 1921, the legal environment in Southeast Kansas had become hopelessly polarized. The state began using the Industrial Court Act to swiftly issue injunctions against even the smallest local labor grievances. When miners attempted to walk out over immediate safety hazards in the deep shaft mines or discrepancies in their pay, they were no longer met by corporate

negotiators; instead, they were met with court subpoenas and sheriff's deputies. The law, which Governor Allen had promised would usher in an era of "industrial peace," had instead created a volatile climate of constant, simmering agitation. The economic struggle for fair compensation had been forcibly transformed into a desperate political struggle for the right to exist as a union, setting the stage for a massive community uprising.

3. The Collapse of Male Leadership in District 14

3.1 Alexander Howat and the Resistance to Compulsory Arbitration The fierce resistance to the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations was spearheaded by Alexander Howat, the uncompromising president of United Mine Workers of America District 14. Born in Scotland and raised in the hardscrabble mining camps of the United States, Howat possessed an oratorical ferocity that elevated him to the status of a folk hero across the Little Balkans. To the diverse immigrant miners of Crawford and Cherokee counties, Howat was a fearless champion who lived among them, understood their daily toils, and articulated their deepest frustrations. To the political establishment in Topeka, however, he was viewed as a dangerous demagogue whose radicalism threatened the fundamental economic stability of the state.

Howat's guiding philosophy was unequivocal: the worker's right to collective action was an absolute, God-given right that could not be legislated away by any court, governor, or legislative body. This deeply held conviction transformed District 14 into an impenetrable fortress of resistance against the state's new labor laws. The primary point of contention between Howat and the Kansas government was the mechanism of compulsory arbitration. Howat argued vehemently that the Industrial Court was merely a sophisticated tool of the employer class, explicitly designed to strip away the only tangible leverage the working class possessed. He refused to recognize the court's subpoena power, outright refused to testify before its appointed judges, and publicly rejected all of its binding rulings. This was not merely a legal strategy; it was an existential battle over the nature of freedom in an industrializing nation. Howat famously argued that if the state could legally force a man to labor under conditions he did not consent to, it had effectively reinstated a form of chattel slavery. This rhetoric resonated profoundly with the immigrant miners of Southeast Kansas, many of whom had fled deeply oppressive and autocratic regimes in Europe only to find themselves subjected to a new form of corporate and state tyranny in America.

3.2 The Schism Between District 14 and the International UMWA Howat’s unyielding defiance of state law did not merely draw the ire of the Kansas government; it created a massive, catastrophic rift within the United Mine Workers of America itself. At the national level, the union was led by John L. Lewis, an ambitious and highly pragmatic president who viewed

Howat’s radicalism as a severe liability. Lewis was actively attempting to build a respectable, centralized national organization that could sit across the table and negotiate with the federal government and massive corporate conglomerates on a professional level. To Lewis, the ongoing rebellion in Kansas was a dangerous distraction that threatened the union's broader legal standing and its ability to secure collective bargaining agreements in other states.

The ideological tension between local radicalism and national pragmatism erupted into open warfare when Howat called a strike over a local grievance at the Dean coal mine. Because this strike was a direct, illegal challenge to the authority of the Industrial Court, Lewis immediately intervened and ordered the Kansas miners back to work, prioritizing legal compliance over local solidarity. Howat, true to his principles, flatly ignored the mandate from the international office. In swift retaliation, Lewis suspended the entire District 14 charter and formally expelled Howat from the UMWA. This devastating internal civil war isolated the Kansas miners entirely. They were no longer just fighting the wealthy coal operators and the heavily armed state of Kansas; they were now actively fighting their own international union leadership, completely cut off from the financial and legal resources of the national UMWA.

3.3 The Incarceration of Union Leadership and the Tactical Vacuum The compounding pressures of state intervention and union abandonment reached a fever pitch in late 1921. Alexander Howat and his vice president, August Dorchy, were formally sentenced to jail in Columbus, Kansas, for explicitly violating a court injunction against striking. Their imprisonment was intended by the state to break the back of the resistance, but it instead served as the final incendiary spark for a massive, unauthorized general strike across the region. With their primary leaders behind bars, the rank-and-file miners walked out of the pits en masse, vowing that not a single ton of coal would be mined until the Industrial Court was abolished and their duly elected leaders were freed.

The strike successfully paralyzed the region's primary industry, but the miners quickly found themselves in an incredibly precarious tactical position. The Kansas Court of Industrial Relations had completely weaponized the local legal system to such an extreme degree that any group of men gathering in public was immediately classified as an illegal assembly and a conspiracy against the state. Concurrently, the coal operators, feeling fully emboldened by the protection of state authorities, began a concerted effort to reopen the regional mines using non-union strikebreakers, heavily guarded by armed sheriff's deputies.

The men of the mining camps were effectively neutralized. If they attempted to physically block the strikebreakers or gather to strategize, they faced the immediate threat of mass arrest, imprisonment, and military violence from the rapidly deploying National Guard. The male workforce was trapped in a state of agonizing paralysis, forced to watch as their jobs were given away and their union was dismantled. It was precisely within this severe vacuum of

leadership—with the men incapacitated by the threat of state violence and legal ruin—that the women of the Little Balkans recognized the urgent necessity to intervene and alter the course of the strike.

4. The Genesis of the Amazon Army: Redefining the Domestic Sphere

4.1 The Cultural Tapestry of Immigrant Radicalism in Kansas A defining characteristic of the Amazon Army was its deep roots in the immigrant experience of the Little Balkans. The mining camps of Crawford and Cherokee counties were intense cultural melting pots where traditional European ideas of communal solidarity seamlessly blended with American labor radicalism. For many of the women involved, the concept of the woman as a fierce, uncompromising defender of the household was a vital cultural touchstone. In many European coal regions, women possessed a long, documented history of participating in bread riots and local community protests when the sheer survival of their families was at stake.

This deep cultural memory provided the women of Kansas with a ready framework for their activism. They did not view themselves as "suffragettes" in the traditional, middle-class sense of the word ; rather, they viewed themselves as essential workers and family protectors whose domestic duties now required them to step boldly into the public square. The sheer diversity of the marchers also served a highly practical tactical purpose. It made it exceedingly difficult for the state government to dismiss the movement as the isolated work of a single "radical" ethnic faction. Instead, the sight of thousands of women from across the globe standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the Kansas snow sent a terrifyingly unified message of universal class defiance to the coal operators and the state.

4.2 Shifting the Battleground from the Pits to the Community The birth of the Amazon Army represented a fundamental and radical redrawing of the boundaries of the domestic sphere. Traditionally, the labor union was viewed strictly as a male space, centered on the grueling physical toil of the deep mine shaft and the fraternal camaraderie of the local union hall. By organizing as an independent, militant force, the women of Southeast Kansas argued that the labor conflict was not merely about the economic metrics of wages and hours; it was about the very sanctity and survival of the home itself.

They brilliantly reframed the prolonged strike as a defensive, maternal action necessary to protect their children and secure their futures from corporate starvation. This ideological shift allowed them to claim a level of unassailable moral high ground that the male miners—who were frequently depicted by the Topeka press and politicians as aggressive or "foreign" agitators—could not easily access. By marching, the women effectively moved the battleground from the subterranean pits to the muddy roads and community centers of the Little Balkans.

Their mobilization proved that the domestic sphere was entirely inseparable from the industrial sphere, and that the fight against the coal operators required a total community effort.

4.3 The Tactical Advantages of Gender in 1920s America The emergence of the Amazon Army was not merely a spontaneous outburst of frustration; it was a highly sophisticated tactical shift that expertly exploited the gendered double standards of early twentieth-century American society. During this era, women were widely perceived by the broader public as the moral and domestic center of the family, and the established ideas of "polite society" generally dictated that women were not acceptable subjects for state-sponsored military violence.

By taking to the fields and roads to physically block the mine entrances, the women of Southeast Kansas created a profound and paralyzing dilemma for both the coal operators and the Kansas National Guard. If the authorities chose to use wooden clubs, tear gas, or firearms against thousands of unarmed women carrying American flags and singing religious hymns, they risked a massive public relations disaster and the total loss of moral authority on a national scale. The women shrewdly utilized this perceived societal "frailty" as an impenetrable protective shield, allowing them to perform brazen acts of physical obstruction that would have resulted in immediate imprisonment or lethal force had their husbands attempted them. They clearly understood that their physical presence on the roads leading to the mines created a formidable human barrier that the law was, at least initially, entirely unwilling to breach. This strategic, weaponized use of gender completely transformed the women from passive observers of the strike into the militant vanguard of the labor struggle.

5. Julia Youvan: The Matriarch of Frontenac and Franklin

5.1 The Role of Elder Women in Immigrant Mining Communities Within the hyper-diverse, heavily immigrant mining camps of Southeast Kansas, the social structure was deeply reliant upon the matriarchal figures of the household. In the coalfields, the sheer unpredictability of life—marked by frequent mine collapses, blacklung disease, and sudden economic destitution—meant that women were far more than passive domestic caretakers. They were the essential economic managers and emotional anchors of their communities. While the men labored in the subterranean darkness of the deep shaft pits, the women navigated the treacherous surface world of the company town. They stretched inadequate wages paid in company scrip, tended to community gardens to supplement meager rations, and nursed the sick and injured when corporate medical care was either nonexistent or prohibitively expensive.

Elder women, in particular, occupied a position of profound, unspoken authority within the Little Balkans. Having emigrated from European regions that often possessed their own long histories of class struggle and agricultural hardship, these women carried with them a deeply

ingrained cultural memory of survival. They had already survived the trans-Atlantic crossing, the brutal assimilation process into the American industrial machine, and the previous, bloody labor strikes that had periodically convulsed the Kansas plains. Because they had weathered decades of cyclical poverty and corporate exploitation, the elder wives and mothers functioned as the connective tissue of the immigrant camps. They were the keepers of communal history and the final arbiters of social cohesion. When a crisis struck, it was to these older matriarchs that the younger generations looked for guidance, stability, and permission to act.

5.2 Julia Youvan's Influence Among the First-Generation Settlers It is within this culturally complex, matriarchal framework that Julia Youvan emerged as a critical catalyst for the 1921 uprising. As a prominent elder within the Slovenian immigrant community, Julia commanded an immense degree of respect across the interconnected towns of Frontenac and Franklin. She was not merely a participant in the local mining culture; she was a foundational pillar of the first-generation settlers who had physically and culturally built the Little Balkans from the ground up. Her long tenure in the region meant that her social influence extended far beyond her immediate family, reaching into the kitchens, churches, and union halls of multiple ethnic enclaves.

Julia's specific authority was derived from her recognized resilience. She embodied the archetype of the immigrant survivor. For the state of Kansas and the local coal operators to dismiss the brewing unrest as the work of youthful anarchists or reckless foreign agitators was an easy public relations strategy. However, the active, visible participation of a highly respected elder like Julia Youvan immediately complicated that narrative. She provided the burgeoning movement with a profound sense of generational weight and moral respectability. Her involvement signaled to the broader community that the impending strike was not a spontaneous riot, but a deeply considered, necessary defense of the community's survival. When a woman of Julia's stature concluded that the situation had become so dire that the traditional rules of domestic propriety had to be abandoned, it served as a powerful validation for every other family in the region.

5.3 Rallying the Wives and Mothers of the Little Balkans As the male leadership of District 14 languished in local jails and the strike began to buckle under the weight of the state's military and legal pressure, Julia Youvan utilized her social capital to execute a brilliant tactical mobilization. While her daughter Mary would serve as the linguistic bridge for the movement, Julia served as the emotional and cultural anchor. She was the driving force who could successfully rally the older generation of miners' wives—the women who might otherwise have remained inside their homes out of a deeply ingrained fear of state retaliation.

Julia's organizing efforts were rooted in the shared, visceral experiences of the older women. She appealed to the mothers who had already lost sons to the mines, and the wives who had

spent decades watching their husbands' health deteriorate for the profit of distant corporate shareholders. By standing at the forefront of the movement, Julia effectively challenged the other elders of the Little Balkans to step out of the shadows. Her presence on the front lines transformed the physical act of marching from a radical political statement into a sacred maternal duty. She proved that the defense of the union was indistinguishable from the defense of the family. In rallying the wives and mothers of Frontenac and Franklin, Julia Youvan weaponized the deepest cultural loyalties of the immigrant community, mobilizing a demographic that the coal operators and the Kansas National Guard were completely unprepared to fight.

6. Mary Skubitz: The Multilingual Voice of Resistance

6.1 Bridging the Generational and Cultural Divide While Julia Youvan provided the Amazon Army with its foundational, matriarchal authority, the sheer logistical complexity of organizing a mass, multi-ethnic protest required a different kind of leadership. This role was filled by Julia's daughter, Mary (Youvan) Skubitz. At approximately thirty-four years old during the December 1921 uprising, Mary represented a crucial demographic bridge within the Little Balkans. As a first-generation American, she possessed a foot in two very different worlds. Through her mother and her marriage into the Skubitz family, she was deeply embedded in the traditional, tight-knit Slovenian community and understood the profound immigrant struggles that defined the region. Simultaneously, she possessed the education and outward-facing assimilation necessary to navigate the broader American societal and legal structures that the miners were striking against.

This dual identity made Mary an indispensable asset. She could sit in the kitchens of Frontenac and relate to the older women who spoke little English and feared deportation, while also understanding the legal intricacies of the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations Act that had imprisoned the union's male leadership. In a community that was highly stratified by age and country of origin, Mary Skubitz functioned as the connective tissue. She translated the raw, desperate survival instincts of the elder matriarchs into a structured, actionable plan that the younger, American-born women of the mining camps could readily execute.

6.2 The Strategic Importance of Multilingual Translation Perhaps the greatest obstacle to union organization in the Southeast Kansas coalfields was the sheer linguistic diversity of the workforce. The Little Balkans was home to a dizzying array of languages and dialects. Historically, coal operators had actively exploited this linguistic fragmentation as a prime strategy for maintaining corporate control. By intentionally mixing miners who could not easily communicate with one another in the same deep shaft pits, the companies sought to prevent

the formation of the communal trust necessary for collective bargaining. When strikes did occur, the inability of different ethnic groups to clearly articulate shared goals often led to factionalism and the eventual collapse of the movement.

Mary Skubitz's unique linguistic abilities effectively neutralized this long-standing corporate strategy. Fluent in five distinct languages, including English, Slovenian, and Italian, Mary possessed the rare ability to communicate directly with nearly every faction within the Crawford and Cherokee county mining camps. During the chaotic, rapidly evolving days of the December strike, she served as the primary communicator and tactical dispatcher for the movement. When decisions were made by the central organizing committee, Mary was the voice that translated the "battle plans" across the region. She ensured that every woman, regardless of her native tongue, thoroughly understood the specific objectives of the march, the rules of non-lethal engagement, and the critical importance of maintaining discipline in the face of the National Guard.

6.3 Unifying the Italian, Slavic, and Austrian Factions The true tactical brilliance of Mary Skubitz's communication skills lay in her ability to forge a unified front out of historically disparate groups. The clandestine meetings that birthed the Amazon Army, particularly the pivotal gathering at Curlee Hall in Franklin, were attended by hundreds of women representing Italian, Slavic, Austrian, and various other European backgrounds. Left to their own devices, these groups might have engaged in isolated, uncoordinated skirmishes with strikebreakers, which the state's military apparatus could have easily isolated and crushed.

Mary ensured that this did not happen. By acting as the universal translator, she transformed a diverse collection of angry, desperate citizens into a highly organized, cohesive unit. When the women marched out into the freezing Kansas dawn, they did not move as separate ethnic mobs; they moved as a single, disciplined army. The Italian women understood the movements of the Austrian women, and the Slavic contingents were in total lockstep with the American-born marchers. This unprecedented level of inter-ethnic coordination completely blindsided the coal operators and the state authorities. Because Mary Skubitz was able to seamlessly unify the various factions, the Amazon Army possessed the massive, coordinated numbers necessary to successfully surround the mine entrances and form an impenetrable human wall against the scabs.

7. The Council of War at Curlee Hall

7.1 The Clandestine Meetings of December 1921 As the bitter winter of 1921 set in, the coalfields of Southeast Kansas descended into a state of tense, suspended animation. The official strike had dragged into its third grueling month, and the male miners found themselves

entirely paralyzed by the aggressive legal injunctions of the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations. Any public gathering of men was immediately broken up by authorities under the suspicion of illegal conspiracy. In response to this draconian surveillance, the organizational heartbeat of the community was forced underground, shifting from the traditional, male-dominated union halls into the clandestine spaces managed by the women of the Little Balkans.

Throughout early December, a series of secret meetings were held in the small mining towns surrounding Pittsburg, Kansas. Because women were largely ignored by the state's network of spies and sheriff's deputies, who viewed them merely as domestic dependents, they were able to gather without drawing immediate military intervention. The most significant and historically consequential of these clandestine gatherings occurred on the evening of December 11, 1921, at Curlee Hall in the town of Franklin. That night, hundreds of women from across the interconnected mining camps braved the freezing temperatures to attend. The crowd was a vivid representation of the region's diverse immigrant tapestry, with Italian, Slavic, Austrian, and American-born women packing the hall to capacity, united by a shared sense of impending economic doom.

7.2 Transforming Relief Efforts into Active Insurgency The gathering at Curlee Hall did not begin as a revolutionary assembly. Initially, the meeting was convened to discuss traditional, socially acceptable domestic duties: coordinating relief efforts, rationing food, and securing winter clothing for the destitute families of the jailed UMWA District 14 leaders. In the early hours of the evening, the women operated within the established parameters of their era, acting as a maternal support system for a male-led strike.

However, as the meeting progressed, the collective mood rapidly shifted from charitable anxiety to militant outrage. The women openly discussed the agonizing reality of their situation: the men had completely failed to stop the coal operators from importing non-union strikebreakers, known derisively as scabs. The rhetoric echoing through Curlee Hall bypassed traditional political and economic theory, focusing entirely on visceral, immediate survival. The matriarchs and wives argued forcefully that if the mines were allowed to successfully operate with non-union labor, their jailed husbands and sons would never be freed by the state. Furthermore, the company scrip they held would become entirely worthless, and their families would face immediate, forceful eviction from company-owned housing in the dead of winter. It became violently clear that passive relief efforts were no longer sufficient; handing out soup and blankets would not stop the coal operators. The realization took hold that survival required direct, confrontational intervention.

7.3 The Decision to March and the Rejection of Passive Observation The climax of the Curlee Hall meeting represents one of the most remarkable pivots in American labor history. Faced with the total collapse of their community's leverage, the women made the collective,

monumental decision to abandon their socially mandated roles as passive observers and support staff. They resolved that the following morning, they would not stay in their kitchens or gardens; they would march directly on the local coal mines.

This was not planned as a polite picket line or a sympathetic vigil. The women decided to organize themselves as a primary combatant force, intending to use their physical bodies to blockade the mine entrances and halt the industrial machinery of the state. This decision was an incredibly radical assertion of female agency, especially within the context of the highly patriarchal, traditional immigrant communities of the 1920s. By voting to march, the women of the Little Balkans formally rejected the idea that the labor war belonged exclusively to the men in the pits. They claimed ownership of the strike, consciously choosing to place themselves directly in the crosshairs of the coal operators, the sheriff's deputies, and the Kansas National Guard. In a single night at Curlee Hall, a relief committee was successfully transformed into an insurgent army.

8. Marching Through the Snow: Tactics and Obstruction

8.1 The December 12 Mobilization at the Jackson-Walker Coal Company The unprecedented mobilization of the Amazon Army officially began in the pre-dawn darkness of December 12, 1921. In the bitter, freezing cold of a Southeast Kansas winter, thousands of women gathered at the union hall in the town of Franklin. Having made the radical decision to intervene the night before at Curlee Hall, the women arrived prepared for a physical confrontation, dressed in heavy winter coats, aprons, and headscarves to ward off the oppressive temperatures. As the sun began to rise over the plains, an estimated force of between two thousand and six thousand women—numbers vary slightly across historical accounts, but all attest to a massive, unprecedented gathering—began a highly disciplined march toward the deep shaft operations of the Jackson-Walker Coal Company.

The sound of their footsteps on the frozen, unpaved ground was accompanied by the singing of religious hymns and patriotic songs, creating an atmosphere that was equal parts religious revival and military maneuver. When the massive column of women finally reached the first designated mine site, they did not merely picket the perimeter. They effectively surrounded the entire entrance of the facility, locking arms and forming an impenetrable human wall. This physical barricade was an immediate tactical success; it completely prevented the morning shift of non-union strikebreakers from crossing the line and entering the pits, thereby halting the industrial operations of the Jackson-Walker mine on the very first day of the mobilization.

8.2 Psychological Warfare, Patriotic Symbolism, and the American Flag The tactics employed by the Amazon Army were a highly sophisticated blend of moral persuasion and psychological

warfare. The most notable and strategically brilliant accessory carried by the marchers was the American flag. Before departing Franklin, hundreds of flags were distributed among the ranks of the immigrant women. These flags were intended to serve a dual purpose. Symbolically, carrying the flag was a powerful assertion of their patriotism and their rightful place as American citizens. In an era defined by the First Red Scare, where the national media and political figures routinely painted striking laborers as foreign anarchists and dangerous Bolsheviks, the women used the American flag to directly subvert the state's narrative. They visually emphasized that their demands for fair wages and the release of their union leaders were deeply rooted in fundamental American rights.

Practically, the flags served as a protective barrier against state violence. The women keenly understood the optics of their situation. By holding the American flag while singing hymns, they created a scenario where any attack by the sheriff's deputies or the National Guard would not just be an attack on unarmed women, but a visual desecration of the nation's most sacred symbols. When the non-union strikebreakers initially approached the mine entrances, they were met with this overwhelming display of patriotic and maternal force. The women first attempted moral persuasion, pleading with the scabs to honor the strike for the sake of the starving mining families. They challenged the strikebreakers' consciences, asking how they could cross a line held by the mothers and wives of their own community.

8.3 The Effectiveness of Red Pepper and Non-Lethal Harassment When moral persuasion inevitably failed to deter the more determined strikebreakers, the Amazon Army was fully prepared to escalate to direct, physical obstruction. However, maintaining their crucial moral high ground required them to strictly avoid the use of firearms, wooden clubs, or any lethal weaponry that would legally justify a violent military response from the state. Instead, they pioneered a series of highly effective, non-lethal harassment tactics.

The most famous and defining weapon of the marchers was the use of crushed red pepper. Many of the women carried small packets of finely ground pepper concealed within the pockets of their heavy aprons. When scabs attempted to force their way through the human barricade, or when sheriff's deputies rode their horses into the crowd to break the lines, the women would throw handfuls of the caustic pepper directly into the eyes of the men and the faces of the horses. This tactic was an act of tactical genius; it was completely non-lethal, yet it caused immediate, blinding pain and total chaos, effectively neutralizing the target without firing a single shot.

In addition to the red pepper, the women utilized a physical maneuver colloquially known as "knee-knocking." When a strikebreaker attempted to cross, a group of women would quickly surround the individual, using their overwhelming numerical advantage to press in closely. By bumping, jostling, and using their knees to destabilize the man's footing, they would physically

push the scab backward and away from the mine entrance without ever throwing a traditional punch. These disruptive actions were meticulously designed to maximize industrial paralysis while carefully remaining just below the threshold of violence that would unleash the lethal force of the Kansas National Guard.

9. The Confrontation with the State: National Guard and Public Optics

9.1 Governor Allen's Deployment of Cavalry and Machine-Gun Detachments The staggering success of the initial December marches fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of the Kansas coal strike. By effectively shutting down the Jackson-Walker operations and demonstrating the capacity to mobilize thousands of women at a moment's notice, the Amazon Army forced the hand of the state government. Governor Henry J. Allen, who had built his political reputation on his uncompromising stance against labor strikes, could not allow this matriarchal insurgency to paralyze the region's essential industries. Viewing the women not as protesting citizens but as an existential threat to the authority of his Court of Industrial Relations, Allen ordered a swift and overwhelming military response.

Within forty-eight hours of the first march, the Kansas National Guard was formally deployed to the Little Balkans. The sheer scale and composition of the military force dispatched to Crawford and Cherokee counties illustrated the state's extreme panic. Allen did not merely send local police; he deployed heavily armed cavalry units and specialized machine-gun detachments to secure the mining infrastructure. The sudden presence of uniformed, mounted soldiers and heavy artillery on the snowy, rural roads of Southeast Kansas created a surreal, intensely volatile environment. The state's explicit objective was to utilize overwhelming shock and awe to terrify the women back into their homes, reasserting the dominance of the coal operators through the implied threat of lethal force.

9.2 Staring Down the Military: Psychological Strain on the Guardsmen If Governor Allen believed that the sight of galloping cavalry and machine-gun nests would break the resolve of the immigrant women, he profoundly miscalculated the depth of their desperation and discipline. When confronted by the National Guard, the Amazon Army did not retreat. Instead, they adapted their non-lethal tactics to meet the military escalation. In several highly documented instances, the women formed tight human barricades and physically stood their ground as state cavalry charged their lines, holding their formation and breaking away only at the last possible terrifying second.

The women masterfully engaged in psychological warfare against the soldiers. Realizing that the guardsmen were mostly young men recruited from agricultural or urban centers outside the coalfields, possessing little to no personal stake in the industrial conflict, the women targeted

their consciences. They would actively surround the mounted soldiers, brandishing their American flags and singing religious hymns directly at them. The matriarchs challenged the young troops face-to-face, loudly asking if they were truly prepared to open fire upon women who looked like their own mothers and sisters merely to protect the profits of wealthy coal barons. This intense moral confrontation created a profound psychological strain on the guardsmen. The soldiers' deep-seated hesitation to strike or shoot unarmed women effectively neutralized the state's primary strategy of military intimidation, forcing the government into a prolonged, awkward, and highly public tactical stalemate.

9.3 The National Media Response and the Weaponization of the Red Scare The surreal spectacle of thousands of women battling the United States military in the freezing Kansas snow could not be contained locally. It was during these intense December standoffs that the *New York Times* and other major metropolitan newspapers dispatched reporters to the region, officially coining the term "Amazon Army." While the national press intended the moniker to be somewhat sensationalist, evoking images of fierce, mythological female warriors, the women of the Little Balkans proudly adopted the title.

However, the resulting media explosion was a double-edged sword. While it successfully brought massive national attention to the severe economic plight of the Kansas miners and the perceived tyranny of the Industrial Court, it was also rapidly weaponized by conservative political forces. Editorialists in Topeka, Kansas City, and beyond seized upon the deep anxieties of the First Red Scare. They aggressively painted the marching women as ignorant, un-American, foreign agitators who were either actively plotting a Bolshevik revolution or being mindlessly manipulated by their radical, jailed husbands. Despite this heavy negative framing and xenophobic propaganda, the sheer undeniable reality of the marches severely damaged the state's narrative. Governor Allen had long maintained that the labor unrest was solely the artificial creation of Alexander Howat and a few rogue union bosses. The undeniable sight of thousands of diverse women sustaining a highly coordinated protest for days on end proved to the American public that the resistance in the coalfields was a massive, authentic, and deeply rooted community struggle.

10. State Retaliation and the Decapitation Strategy

10.1 Identifying the Brains of the Operation: Targeting Julia and Mary As the Amazon Army successfully sustained its blockade for a third consecutive day, the Kansas state government and the coal operators realized that their initial strategy of military intimidation had completely failed. The deployment of the National Guard had not broken the resolve of the women; instead, it had generated national sympathy and hardened the marchers' defiance. Forced to

adapt, the authorities shifted from a strategy of mass confrontation to one of targeted decapitation. They recognized that the marches were not the chaotic actions of a spontaneous, disorganized mob, but rather the execution of a highly coordinated tactical plan.

To break the strike, the state needed to dismantle the movement's command structure. Intelligence gathered by sheriff's deputies and corporate detectives quickly pointed to the central organizing figures operating out of Frontenac and Franklin. Authorities specifically identified Julia Youvan and Mary Skubitz as the primary architects—the operational "brains" of the matriarchal insurgency. The state understood that Julia provided the essential social capital and moral authority needed to rally the elder immigrant women, while Mary functioned as the indispensable logistical and linguistic coordinator. The authorities calculated that if they could successfully sever this mother-daughter command link, the massive, multi-ethnic coalition would rapidly fracture into isolated, easily manageable factions.

10.2 The Arrest of the Mother-Daughter Command When the state finally moved to execute its crackdown on the Amazon Army, the authorities deliberately bypassed the rank-and-file marchers holding the lines at the mine entrances. Instead, they executed a precise, targeted sweep to remove the leadership. Julia and Mary were arrested together, marking a highly symbolic and strategic victory for the coal operators. By taking both women into custody simultaneously, the state successfully removed the two most critical pillars of the movement in a single motion.

The mother and daughter were transported away from their community in Franklin and incarcerated in the Crawford County jail. This arrest was intended to be deeply demoralizing for the mining camps. The state hoped that the sight of a respected, elder matriarch like Julia being thrown into a jail cell alongside her daughter would finally terrify the remaining women into submission. By physically removing them from the region, the state aimed to create an immediate tactical vacuum, silencing Mary's multilingual commands and removing Julia's stabilizing presence from the front lines.

10.3 The Punitive Bail Strategy: The Significance of the $750 Bond The most revealing evidence of the profound threat that Julia Youvan and Mary Skubitz posed to the state of Kansas was the heavily punitive bail strategy deployed following their incarceration. In the American legal system, bail is theoretically intended to ensure an individual's appearance in court, but in the context of the Little Balkans labor war, it was weaponized as a tool of indefinite political detention.

When the local authorities set the bail for the arrested marchers, the standard bond for a rank-and-file participant was set at two hundred dollars—a significant but potentially manageable sum for a community pooling its meager resources. However, the state set the bail for both Julia

and Mary at an exorbitant seven hundred and fifty dollars each. This staggering financial discrepancy was not an accident; it was a tacit, undeniable admission by the Kansas government and the coal operators of the women's supreme organizational value. The heavily inflated bond was specifically engineered to ensure they remained locked behind bars. The state authorities fully recognized that if Julia and Mary were able to post bail and return to the streets of Frontenac and Franklin, the multi-ethnic coalition would immediately re-form, the tactical coordination would resume, and the marches would never stop. By placing such an extreme financial premium on their freedom, the state inadvertently validated the mother-daughter duo as the undisputed generals of the Amazon Army.

11. Documenting Defiance: Mary Skubitz's Ledger-Paper Journal

11.1 The Importance of Primary Sources in Marginalized Labor Histories The historical record of the American labor movement, particularly concerning the early twentieth century, is frequently subjected to a profound institutional silence. State archives and traditional historical narratives have historically prioritized the records of the establishment: police blotters, court injunctions, military deployment logs, and the official correspondence of political figures like Governor Henry J. Allen. When the working class is mentioned in these official documents, it is typically filtered through the lens of state authority, reducing complex community struggles to mere criminal disturbances. This erasure is doubly severe for immigrant women, whose contributions to labor radicalism were routinely dismissed by contemporary male union leaders and actively sanitized by later historians aiming to construct a more respectable, conservative regional history.

Because of this systemic erasure, primary sources authored directly by the working-class women who orchestrated these uprisings are incredibly rare and invaluable. Mary Skubitz’s ledger-paper journal stands as a vital, unvarnished counter-narrative to the official state record. Instead of relying on the biased reporting of the national press, which vacillated between characterizing the marchers as a mythological Amazon Army or an ignorant mob of foreign agitators, historians are granted direct access to the tactical logic and emotional reality of the insurgents themselves. The journal breaks the monopoly of the state narrative, proving that the women of the Little Balkans were not mindless participants caught in a spontaneous riot, but highly conscious political actors engaging in a calculated campaign of civil disobedience.

11.2 Chronicling the Emotional and Physical Toll of the December Marches Beyond its value as a political document, the journal provides a deeply granular, visceral account of the three-day mobilization that paralyzed the Southeast Kansas coalfields. While newspaper clippings can confirm the dates and locations of the marches, Mary Skubitz’s ledger-paper entries capture the

intimate reality of the strike. She documented the specific logistical mechanics of the uprising that would otherwise have been lost to time: the exact patriotic songs and religious hymns chosen to psychologically unnerve the National Guard, the clandestine distribution of the American flags, and the precise, coordinated application of the red pepper tactics used to blind the horses of the sheriff's deputies.

Furthermore, the journal chronicles the severe physical and emotional toll endured by the women. Skubitz recorded the brutal conditions of the Kansas winter, detailing the biting cold of the pre-dawn mobilizations and the sheer physical exhaustion of maintaining human barricades for hours on end. The writings capture the agonizing tension of staring down fully armed cavalry units and machine-gun detachments, highlighting the immense courage required to hold the line when the threat of lethal state violence was imminent. By recording these immediate, terrifying realities, the journal prevents the Amazon Army from being reduced to a sterile academic concept, preserving the very human desperation and endurance that fueled the uprising.

11.3 Preserving the Legacy of Julia Youvan Through Her Daughter's Eyes Perhaps the most profound historical contribution of the ledger-paper journal is its deeply personal preservation of the mother-daughter command structure. Throughout her writings, Mary Skubitz frequently centers the narrative on her mother, Julia Youvan. In the pages of the journal, Julia is elevated from an anonymous participant in a massive crowd to a defining, central matriarch. Mary describes her mother as an unwavering pillar of strength, documenting how Julia's presence alone was enough to rally the older, more fearful immigrant wives to the front lines of the conflict.

The journal serves as a beautiful, radical testament to generational solidarity. It illustrates how the survival instincts and deep communal authority of the elder generation (Julia) perfectly synchronized with the organizational and communicative skills of the younger generation (Mary). Because the state of Kansas ultimately sought to crush the movement by arresting these two women and hiding them behind the walls of the Crawford County jail, Mary's written record ensures that their strategic partnership outlived their physical incarceration. By chronicling the strike through her own eyes, Mary Skubitz ensured that the matriarchs of the Little Balkans—and her mother specifically—were permanently cemented as the undeniable architects of one of the most remarkable labor uprisings in American history.

12. Conclusion: The Lasting Legacy of the Youvan Women

12.1 The Immediate Impact on the Reopening of the Kansas Mines While the deployment of the Kansas National Guard and the targeted arrests of Julia Youvan and Mary Skubitz ultimately broke the physical blockade of the Amazon Army, the immediate tactical impact of their uprising was undeniable. The multi-day mobilization successfully paralyzed the regional coal industry at a critical moment, significantly delaying the coal operators' attempts to reopen the mines with non-union strikebreakers. Furthermore, the matriarchal insurgency forced the state of Kansas to expend massive political and financial resources to maintain order, exposing the inherent fragility of Governor Allen's Court of Industrial Relations Act.

More importantly, the bold actions of the women fundamentally revitalized the psychological morale of the Little Balkans. Prior to the December marches, the mining communities were buckling under the weight of state suppression; the male leadership of District 14 was locked in jail, and the international union under John L. Lewis had abandoned them. In this bleak environment, the sight of their mothers, wives, and daughters successfully staring down military cavalry provided a profound surge of hope. The Amazon Army proved that the community's resilience was not entirely dependent on the men in the pits or the official union bureaucracy. Even in the face of temporary defeat and the incarceration of their female leaders, the immigrant families of Crawford and Cherokee counties learned that they possessed the collective power to disrupt the machinery of industrial capitalism.

12.2 Paving the Way for the New Deal and the Wagner Act The uprisings of 1921, both in the Little Balkans and the Appalachian coalfields, were short-term military and legal failures, yet they served as the essential, blood-soaked groundwork for the transformative federal labor legislation of the subsequent decade. The sheer scale of the community desperation demonstrated by the Amazon Army helped convince future federal policymakers that the company town system, the denial of collective bargaining, and the use of state military forces to break strikes were fundamentally incompatible with a stable American democracy.

When the Great Depression later paralyzed the nation, the memory of these violent, desperate 1920s labor conflicts directly informed the drafting of the National Industrial Recovery Act and, eventually, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, commonly known as the Wagner Act. These monumental federal laws finally granted American workers the protected legal right to organize and bargain collectively, effectively outlawing the "yellow-dog" contracts and the aggressive corporate suppression that the Youvan women had marched against. Furthermore, the specific legacy of the Youvan women echoed directly into the halls of power through Mary’s son, Joe Skubitz. Growing up in the shadow of his mother and grandmother's incarceration, Joe Skubitz eventually served as a United States Congressman for Kansas from 1963 to 1979. During his tenure, he became a champion for the mining communities, proving highly instrumental in

passing critical pro-miner legislation, including the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 and the Black Lung Benefits Act of 1972. The maternal defense of the mining camps in 1921 directly shaped the federal protections enjoyed by industrial workers generations later.

12.3 Reclaiming Matriarchal Defiance in the Memory of American Labor For much of the twentieth century, the extraordinary actions of the Amazon Army existed in a state of deliberate historical erasure. The radicalism of the Little Balkans was actively sanitized by state institutions favoring a more peaceful narrative of Midwestern agricultural stability, and the massive contributions of immigrant women were frequently marginalized by male-dominated labor histories. The stories of the red pepper marches and the incarceration of the Youvan women were kept alive not in official state textbooks, but within the private oral traditions of the local mining families and the meticulously preserved pages of Mary Skubitz's ledger-paper journal.

Today, there is a vital, ongoing movement to reclaim this hidden history. Local historians, labor organizers, and the descendants of the Crawford and Cherokee county miners have worked tirelessly to restore the legacy of the Amazon Army to its rightful place at the center of American labor history. Memorials and historical markers now stand in towns like Franklin and Frontenac, ensuring that the tactical ingenuity of these women is permanently recognized. The legacy of Julia Youvan and Mary Skubitz proves that the fight for industrial dignity in the 1920s was a total community effort that completely transcended the traditional boundaries of gender and ethnicity. By stepping out of the domestic sphere to challenge the combined might of corporate monopolies and state military power, the matriarchs of the Little Balkans redefined the nature of civil disobedience, leaving behind an enduring blueprint for radical, community-based resistance.

Postscript: "Anarchists, Communists," and Enemies of the Industrial Order While the national press popularized the moniker of the "Amazon Army," the government of Kansas viewed the women of the Little Balkans through a far more hostile lens. Recognizing the profound threat that Julia Youvan and Mary Skubitz posed to the state's economic stability, local judges and state officials effectively treated the mother-daughter duo as enemies of the state, publicly branding the marchers as "anarchists and Communists." The most glaring evidence of their perceived threat level was the state's punitive legal retaliation. Following their arrest, authorities hit Julia and Mary with an exorbitant $750 bail bond—nearly four times the standard rate applied to other protesters. This calculated financial suppression was a tacit admission by the Kansas government: these two women were not simply participating in a local disturbance; they were the strategic generals of an insurgency that had to be silenced at all costs.

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The author has published over 5,300 AI-assisted papers at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Douglas-Youvan/research . Google Scholar has indexed these preprints, and if you want a particular reference, the AI mode of a Google search (Gemini) has efficiently catalogued these preprints.

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ANARCHISTS, COMMUNISTS.
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